

## Rituals of *Cầu mùa* (Praying for a Fertile Crop) in Vietnam: Similarity in Concept and Diversity in Practice

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Received February 1, 2017  
Accepted February 1, 2017  
Published July 21, 2017  
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.26721/spafajournal.v1i0.169>

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### Abstract

Similar to many Southeast Asian cultures, Vietnam has drawn its cultural identity from agriculture, particularly the rice culture. The rituals of *Cầu mùa* (Praying for a Fertile Crop) are present in the cultures of most of the peoples residing in Vietnam, from the highlands in the central area to the northern mountains. In Vietnam, the rituals of *Cầu mùa* are usually held in spring, the season for breaking ground and sowing, when farmers have a common wish for a fertile and bumper crop. However, ritual practice varies due to the diversity of environmental conditions, customs and the experiences of different communities. This article is a study of the similarity in concept and diversity in practice of the *Cầu mùa* rituals in Vietnam.

This paper was presented at the Spiritual Dimensions of Rice Culture in Southeast Asia: Seminar, Rituals and Performances, organized by SEAMEO SPAFA on 11-14 May 2015 at Srinakharinwirot University, Bangkok, Thailand. It is part of an upcoming collected edition of papers presented at the seminar.

Keywords: ritual, rice culture, agriculture, fertility beliefs, animism, water worship

## Introduction

The agricultural production and process of rice crop has long been a dominant element in many aspects of Vietnamese lives, from the way of thinking and working to religious beliefs and customs. Because agricultural production depends on the natural environment, people are aware of the need to respect nature. In order to promote the interrelationship between humans and nature, agricultural festivals are considered a significant symbolic communication that conveys to the divine or supernatural world messages about humans' desire for a fertile crop and a prosperous, happy life. During the life cycle of rice, a series of rituals through which people honour rice as a god is held. Although there exist in Vietnam diverse rituals with regard to the rice life cycle, a few main groups can be recognized, including *Cầu mùa* (Praying for a Fertile Crop), *Cúng lúa mới* (Worship to New Rice) and *Cúng hồn lúa* (Worship to Rice Spirit). In addition, there are a number of other rituals such as *Cầu mưa* (Praying for Rain), *Cầu tạnh* (Praying for Suspension of Rain), *Cúng trừ sâu bọ* (Praying for Avoidance of Pests), etc., which are held on specific occasions.

This paper focuses on *Cầu mùa* (Praying for a Fertile Crop), an important group of rituals in the life cycle of rice. The role of this kind of ritual is to start a new production process, a new cycle that relates to the rice farming activities of a particular community. These rituals express a close relationship between humans and the natural environment and people's desire for a prosperous and happy life. In various manifestations, these rituals symbolize the fertility of a community with regard to its natural conditions such as the land, soil, water supply, etc., along with people's conception or notion of the universe and relationship between human and nature. While the rituals in this group share similarities in several major points, including animism – the belief that objects in nature have a spirit, the importance of water in the spiritual life of farmers, and fertility beliefs, which have their roots in the ancient time. Variety in the performance and practice of rituals can be found throughout Vietnam.

## Similarity in Concept

In Vietnam, *Cầu mùa* rituals are based on agricultural spiritualism, or the spirit of agriculture, which refers to the idea that food production and consumption is linked to the essential spiritual nature of humanity. It assumes that spirituality is inherent in human consciousness, is perhaps a product of it and is accessible to all who cultivate it.

## Animism

According to animism, every object has a spirit or soul. Spirits can be calmed by appeasement so that they will not cause harm or trouble. By virtue of this belief, Vietnamese people have traditionally worshipped a lot of deities, especially those related to agriculture, such as the sun, earth, water, forests, mountains and trees. Based on their experience in agricultural production, farmers believe that supernatural power (e.g. the gods of cloud, rain, rice, etc.) have an impact on the success or failure of crops. For example, in case of a bad weather, if long and heavy rain or drought comes after sowing or transplanting in the paddies, the rice will die en masse, leading to a crop failure. Therefore, in addition to their efforts in ploughing, transplanting and cultivating the rice, farmers have recourse to the support from gods, seeking divine

help that can bring “favourable rain and wind”, a lush and bumper crop and sufficient food.

Animism can be observed in sun worshiping, as illustrated in the engravings on the *Đông Sơn* drumhead (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. *Đông Sơn* drumhead with the symbol of the sun at the centre (photo by Ngô Vương Anh)

Apart from sun worship, moon worship is also very popular among communities of agricultural spiritualism. Plant worship is said to be a type of primitive beliefs and is still found in many places in modern Vietnam. Stone worship is also observed, mostly in the cultures of ethnic groups.

### **Water Worship**

Because of the character of its terrain, Vietnam’s agricultural culture is deeply connected to water. Harmonious water would bring a good harvest while an angry flood would wipe out the rice fields and houses. To be blessed and avoid these troubles, people constantly make the effort to please the spirit of water and honour the water as a god.

Annually, some villages in northern Vietnam carry out a water procession to honour the water. In the procession, people pick up water from the river (Fig. 2) or a sacred source (Fig. 3) and bring it to a communal house or temple. The “sacred water” is then used to bathe statues of gods as a way of showing respect. In relation to water worship, “Praying for Rain” is one of the most popular rituals in agricultural festivals in Vietnam and considered as a part of the “Praying for a Fertile Crop” ritual in many communities. Because water plays an important role in the success of a crop, the ritual is usually held at the beginning of a new crop or in times of drought, indicating people’s wishes to have enough water for cultivation. However, to avoid an overflow of water onto farmlands, people also organize the ritual of “Praying for Suspension of Rain”, which is usually held amid the rainy season. Kite flying is a



symbolic game as well as a rite in this ritual. Vietnamese farmers believe that the higher the kite flies, the more beautiful the weather. It is the sign that the gods accept human prayers.



Figure 2. A rite in a water procession at Độc Bộ Temple, Yên Nhân commune, Ý Yên district, Nam Định province (photo by Ngô Vương Anh)



Figure 3. Picking sacred water at Dội Well, starting Đuối Temple's Festival, Phú Lương district, Thái Nguyên province (photo by Phạm Thị Thủy Chung)

### **Fertility Belief**

For rice farmers, the yin and yang, Earth and Heaven, and mountains and rivers are symbols of fertility that harmonize in nature. Beliefs about fertility reflect human desire for the flourishing, proliferation, fulfilment and prosperity of life. According to ancient Vietnamese beliefs, sacred power resides in nature and in each person and can be transferred to animals and plants. Fertility has always been understood in the broadest sense – not only in terms of reproduction, the harmony between male and female and the proliferation of race, but also the desire for a fulfilled and everlasting life, flourishing plants, and bumper harvests. Beliefs about fertility can be observed in multiple cases, for example, the decorative statues around a grave house of Jrai people; the sacred *linga* and *yoni* at the Mỹ Sơn sanctuary in Quảng Nam province; the rite of *nỗ – nường* meeting in the *Trò Trám* festival in Tứ Xã in Phú Thọ province; and Viet people hanging a couple of phallic and yonic symbols on trees or calabash rigs to wish for abundant and big fruits.

Therefore, animism, worship of sacred water and fertility beliefs are widely practised in Vietnam based on the concept of fertility.

### **Diversity in Practice**

Rituals of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” are widely practised in Vietnam. While each shares similar beliefs about fertility, forms of ritual practice vary due to the diversity of environmental conditions, customs and experiences of different communities. Differences exist in many aspects, such as the location of ritual, time of ritual, offerings, objects of worship, ritual implementers, and ritual activities.

### **Location of Ritual**

The rite of sacred field selection is organized at the beginning of the ritual. The selected field must be large and plane. While communities of wet rice cultivation in the north usually select a field near the entrance of their village (e.g. the Tày and Nùng peoples in the north-western region of Vietnam organize *Lồng tồng*, their most important festival of the year; the Dao people have a similar festival called *Lống Tộng*; the Giáy people have *Roong Pooc*; and the Viet people have *Hạ điền* or *Tịch điền*, meaning “entering the field”), communities of highland fields in central mountains (e.g. the Êđê and M’ông people) opt for the plane ground in front of the communal house. These selections result from the characteristics of residence and farming locality. While people associated with wet rice cultivation usually live close to their rice fields, people in central mountains cultivate far from their residence.

### **Time of Ritual**

In Vietnam, most of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” rituals are held in spring (the first three months in lunar year, from February to April), but in some places these rituals are held at the beginning of or amid the rainy season (May or July). Vietnamese people believe that spring is the season of fertility, when trees and plants are in bud and blossom. These rituals are organized at the beginning of crop production and considered as the most important festivals of the year. In some communities, the beginning or the middle of the rainy season is the time for starting a crop, and these rituals usually include the ritual of “Praying for Rain” or a water procession. Usually, the ritual of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” is held for a full day (some festivals last from three to seven days), so the ritual starts in the morning, but the water procession is

usually held at night. It is believed that the core of water is the yin feature, which belongs to the night.

For example, in the festival of Và-Ngự Dội temples, there is the rite of Tản Viên Saint (god of mountain) procession from Và Temple in Sơn Tây district, Hanoi City at the midnight to Ngự Dội Temple in Vĩnh Tường district, Vĩnh Phúc province. Specifically, this procession crosses the Red River (the border between two provinces) to pick up water in the early morning. After worshipping at Ngự Dội Temple, the throne of Tản Viên Saint and the holy water are moved back to Và Temple.



Figure 4. Offerings in the *Ooc Pò* of Nùng people, Đồng Hỷ district, Thái Nguyên province (photo by Phạm Thị Thủy Chung)

### ***Offerings***

Offerings in the rituals of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” are varied but based on agricultural products and symbols. At the *Ooc Pò* of Nùng people, offerings are boiled chicken, sticky rice-wine, *khẩu sly*, *khảo*, *péng*, *xôi*, the special items made from sticky rice (Fig. 4). San Chí (Sán Chay) people prepare offerings with sticky rice-wine, five-color sticky rice, boiled pig's head and tail, live chicken, rice, seeds, salt, candles and flowers (Fig 5). At the *Roong Pooc* of the Giáy, people prepare offerings including rings, symbolizing the sun (made of bamboo and paper in red with fringes in blue, red, purple and yellow) and the moon (yellow with the yin and yang symbol at the centre), and those that symbolize prosperity such as cloths, eggs, bamboo shoots, silver piastres and six *con* (colourful fabric balls) of maidens. Food offerings include cooked sticky rice and chicken.

While the Giáy people together prepare the offerings for the entire community, in the *Lồng tồng* festival of Tày and Nùng people, each family prepares one altar with offerings for the god of earth, the god of mountain, Shennong and Tutelary. These are beautiful and plentiful offerings, usually including sticky rice, pork, rice wine and cakes such as *bánh khảo*, *bánh dày* and *chè lam*. On some special occasions, there is sacrifice of a buffalo, pig, goat or cock. After the worship, families



invite villagers to eat their food offerings. The family that has more people coming to eat is believed to have a good crop that year.



Figure 5. Offerings in the rite of San Chí people, Định Hóa district, Thái Nguyên province (photo by Phạm Thị Thủy Chung)

### ***Objects of Worship and Ritual Implementers***

Another aspect of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” rituals to be considered is the objects of worship and the ritual implementers. Among the people in highlands, the objects of worship are supernatural gods such as Heaven, Earth, Mountain, River, etc. In addition, people in the lowlands or the delta usually offer worship to Shennong (the patron god of farmers) and/or Tutelary (the patron saint of a village); many communities worship both of these gods. But comparatively, communities living in the north put more emphasis on worshipping Shennong and Tutelary due to their tradition of royal reverence. Communities living in central highlands give more emphasis to the worship of supernatural gods due to their rich tradition of ancient beliefs.

Moreover, differences are found with regard to ritual implementers. Generally, people with high honour play the role of the master of ritual. They may be the king, a senior villager, a strong young man, a selected couple, etc.

For example, in the *Tịch điền* festival in Đội Sơn, Hà Nam province, homeland of the historical king Lê Đại Hành, the royal ploughing is enacted with an old man with great reputation playing the role of King Lê Đại Hành, who symbolizes a patriotic and people-loving monarch. The king reincarnation implements the worship and creates symbolic ploughing lines on the sacred field. In the rite of “Coming to the Field” in Phổ Yên district, Thái Nguyên province, everybody starts ploughing on their own family’s field.

### ***Ritual Activities***

Activities in “Praying for a Fertile Crop” rituals are plentiful: ploughing, sowing, water processions, *rẫy* (highland field) burning, digging of holes for sowing seeds and

symbolic games (throwing *con*, wrestling, catching the loach in a jar, dragon dancing, boat racing, etc.). Most of the activities imitate and symbolize farming works, but some are highly metaphorical, all of which can be considered in two aspects: honouring and worshipping, and rousing and provoking. Honouring and worshipping activities aim to satisfy deities while rousing activities aim to provoke or wake up the deities (much emphasized in the worship of supernatural beings or ancient fertility gods).

For example, in Giáy culture in Lào Cai province, the ritual of “Praying for Rain” is held at the location of a water source, chaired by a widow and participated by a group of children. They make a hole in the ground and cover it with an areca spathe with an areca leaf going through the spathe down to the bottom of the hole. The widow keeps the areca leaf between her thighs. While the children knock on the spathe, the widow moves the areca leaf that symbolizes the tail of *thường luồng* (naga). Suddenly, she picks up the leaf and runs down the stream, shouting that the naga has been caught. The children also cheer in response. The widow and the children then splash the water to make everybody wet while shouting “Raining! Raining!” In spring, the Đồng Kỵ village in the suburbs of Hanoi organizes a festival in which people make a procession of wooden genital symbols. At the end of the festival, the genital symbols are burnt and people take the ashes to sprinkle on their fields. This ritual signifies the transfer of vitality to the earth and plants. In the *Roong Pooc* of the Giáy people in Lào Cai province, when the offerings are ready, senior villagers pray for peace and prosperity. After an act of offering and praying, people play the drum and the clarinet and start to play symbolic games. The first game is called “throwing *con*”; men and women stand on opposite sides with a tree of *con* between them. The senior villagers kick off the game by throwing six *con* three times, then others play with the *con* in turn. Colourful balls rapidly fly towards the ring on the top of the tree of *con*. People believe that if a *con* can break through the paper in the ring, it is a sign of a prosperous crop (Fig. 6). Besides “throwing *con*”, tug of war is also a symbolic game and part of the ritual. A group of young boys (standing on the east side, symbolizing the yang or the sun) and a group of young girls (standing on the west side, symbolizing the yin) hold the two ends of a big rope. If the boys (yin) win, it is believed that this year the villagers will have a bumper crop. At the end of the ritual, the senior villagers pray to lower the *con* tree. Two selected young boys and two strong buffaloes plough five lines in the field, symbolizing the starting of a new crop. Then, people share the food offerings. Another symbolic game is wrestling. The wrestling arena is usually a round space in the square yard in front of the communal house. This is not an accidental arrangement as it has a meaning. According to Vietnamese beliefs, the circle and the square are perfect shapes. Circles represent the sky and the yang while squares represent the earth and the yin. Circles and squares and the yang and yin are harmonious combinations that bring good things. So, wrestling is not just a game; it represents the Vietnamese people’s prayers for favourable weather and good crops. Folk games and performances at village festivals reflect Vietnamese belief in the mythical world. Such a sincere belief enriches their spiritual life.





Figure 6. Throwing *con* in *Lồng tồng* Festival at Định Hóa district, Thái Nguyên province (photo by Đinh Hồng Hải)

## Conclusion

The rituals of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” are part of the rice life cycle. They express community traditions in many aspects and give prominence to community union. Through this series of rituals, cultural identity can be recognized and the human desire for a prosperous and happy life expressed in various manifestations, from simple to complex, and natural to artistic behaviours.

Although sharing a common concept of fertility and nature worship, the rituals of “Praying for a Fertile Crop” in Vietnam vary in terms of practice. This diversity is based on the particularities of each culture, including natural conditions, customs and people’s conception of the universe, and the relationship between humans and nature. Indeed, it is a challenge to classify the aforementioned rituals into clear different beliefs because of the complexity of the rites.

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